

Report says oil, natural gas supplies blocked by rules

EnergyAdvocates of drilling point to BLM study as evidence of the need to relax restrictions

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WASHINGTON - About 3 percent of oil deposits and 13 percent of natural gas pockets on 99 million acres of federal land can be developed without restrictions, according to a federal inventory released Tuesday.

The oil and gas industry, which is seeking more access to public lands, embraced the assessment, while environmental groups accused the Bureau of Land Management-led report of disregarding science and economics in favor of politics.

BLM Director Kathleen Clarke defended the inventory.

"We're not attempting to color this data. It is a study that is scientific. It is unbiased," said Clarke. "It gives us a complete and accurate picture of what the realities are there for development."

Congress directed BLM to conduct the study after a 2003 report showed that most federal land in the Rocky Mountains was available for development.

The new report expanded its assessment to cover about 76 percent of the nation's onshore oil and gas reserves on federal land.

The BLM found that about 47 trillion cubic feet of natural gas are entirely off-limits, while 114 trillion cubic feet can be developed with some limitations. More than 25 trillion cubic feet can be developed without restrictions.

The report said 10.5 billion barrels of oil could not be tapped, most of it in Alaska and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, an area the Bush administration has been trying for years to open to drilling. About 9.8 billion barrels are subject to varying degrees of restrictions.

Four of the basins studied were partially in Utah, crossing into neighboring states: The Uinta-Piceance, the Paradox-San Juan, the Wyoming Thrust Belt, and the Greater Green River Basin.

The oil and gas industry enjoyed far greater access to those basins than others nationally.

A *Tribune* analysis shows that nearly half of the oil and 58 percent of the natural gas resources are open to drilling with only minor restrictions. About 12 percent of the oil resources and less than 10 percent of the natural gas in those four basins cannot be leased.

The United States consumes some 7.6 billion barrels of oil and 22 trillion cubic feet of natural gas each year.

The oil and gas that can't be leased includes resources buried beneath 5.6 million acres

of national parks and other forests and wilderness areas that were included in the study - areas in which Clarke said there is no intention to drill. It also includes lands put off limits by Congress or the president and parcels where environmental studies are incomplete.

"The study appears to confirm what we've been hearing from . . . the people who do the work out on the ground in the Mountain West, that in a time of need, energy resources of national importance underlying public lands, multiple-use lands, are closed off by an assortment of restrictions," said Richard Ranger, an exploration manager with the American Petroleum Institute. He said the industry will likely use the report to bolster its case for more access to federal land.

But Peter Morton, a Wilderness Society economist, said the figures were doctored to meet Bush administration's goals.

"When you have a predetermined agenda to drill more oil and gas wells, they developed a methodology to make sure they reached that conclusion," he said. "From my perspective it has zero credibility."